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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000423

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SUBJECT: GAUGING REGIME'S LEVEL OF UNHAPPINESS WITH LOW  
VOTER TURNOUT

REF: A. DAMASCUS 0381

[B](#). DAMASCUS 0413

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The turnout for the April 22-23 parliamentary elections was so low that regime insiders considered it "a catastrophe," reflecting not merely profound apathy but the dimensions of "an informal boycott," according to MFA advisor Dr. Samir al-Taki. Two senior members of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command have been harshly criticized for failing completely to use party machinery and other means to mobilize a respectable portion of the voting population. It will be interesting to see if the regime can stir up any greater degree of excitement and turnout for the upcoming presidential referendum. In the absence of some external development -- which the regime could use to manipulate public opinion and yoke the regime's fate to Syrian dignity -- it is doubtful the regime will succeed in stirring the Syrian electorate out of its apathy. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Informal MFA advisor Dr. Samir al-Taki told A/DCM May 3 that the turnout for the April 22-23 parliamentary elections was so low that regime insiders considered it "a catastrophe." In their view, it was so low that it reflected not just apathy but "an informal boycott," added al-Taki, noting that he understood that President Asad shared this concern. Two key members of the Ba'ath Party Regional Command, Hisham Ikhtiyar and Mohammed Saeed Bukhaytin, have been singled out and bluntly criticized for completely failing to get out the voters to a respectable level, even among the Ba'ath Party faithful. (We have heard that a few others have also been singled out for criticism.) Al-Taki speculated that both men would be scapegoated for the turnout failure. (Note: Al-Taki, who directs the Sharq think tank, is close to FM Walid Mu'allim and head of the General Intelligence Directorate, General Ali Mamluk.)

[1](#)3. (C) Al-Taki reported his conversation with Minister of Information Mohsin Bilal, who shared with him commonly repeated anecdotes of Ministry employees making weak excuses -- "Oh, I left my voter card in Homs," or "My brother forgot to send it to me" -- to explain their failure to vote. Al-Taki recounted the anecdotes, and said Bilal had made the same point, to illustrate that people, even those considered part of one pillar of the regime, no longer cared enough to even make a pretense of support.

[1](#)4. (C) In al-Taki's view, the turnout failure reflects a bigger problem. The traditional structures the Ba'ath regime has used for decades to mobilize Syrians just no longer work. The party, the professional syndicates, the civil service,

and the press are no longer effective at drumming up support for the regime. While the security services could be unleashed to intimidate people into voting, Asad has tried to convince Syrians that he would keep these services out of their private lives, so long as they avoided politics, noted al-Taki. (Obviously, al-Taki's benign view of the security services is not shared by civil society activists who must deal with constant, intimidating attention from these services.) In al-Taki's view, the regime faces long-term problems. Asad needs to find a way to share power -- political power -- with the Sunnis, led by the business elite, if he wants to extend the life of his regime, claimed al-Taki.

15. (C) When asked about a few of the more contested races for independent seats, al-Taki said it was clear that the regime had interfered to prevent the election of businessman Ihsan Sankar and then-MP Basil Dahdouh. Sankar was considered too independent, and Dahdouh as well, although the regime's real beef with Dahdouh was that he is considered too pro-French. In the past that had been acceptable to the regime, but in the current political environment, given the rancorous state of Syrian-French relations at present, it was unacceptable. Al-Taki acknowledged that Sankar, because of his Sunni business background, could possibly serve as a transitional political figure in the future between the regime and the business class, although he noted that Sankar had some in-law Alawite connections (his wife's mother is an Alawite) that some Sunnis might find problematic.

16. (C) In a separate May 3 conversation with A/DCM, independent candidate Ihsan Sankar also noted that the Asad regime is very unhappy with the level of the turnout, which

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he put at 5-6 percent maximum. (Note: The Minister of Interior announced April 26 that the official turnout of those registered to vote was 56 percent. Ref B.) Sankar recounted a May 2 conversation he had with Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Hassoun, in which the latter expressed "astonishment" at the extremely low voter turnout. Sankar told A/DCM the level of turnout reflected in some way the opposition's call for a boycott of the election and also painfully reminded the regime that former VP Khaddam and his National Salvation Front had called for an election boycott. Sankar insisted that he had won an independent seat, expressing his belief that he had obtained some 70,000 votes, with heavy support among those who voted in the business community, among Sunnis, and with minorities such as the Druze.

17. (C) While the regime would try harder for the upcoming Presidential referendum, al-Taki expressed skepticism that turnout would be much better. (Comment: Despite al-Taki's view, many of our contacts believe there is much greater pressure on people to vote in the presidential referendum, some of it self-imposed by voters fearful of being accused later of disloyalty, some likely engineered by security services spreading rumors about possible retaliation against people who cannot prove they voted.) A large Asad campaign tent -- clearly referring to Bashar without naming him -- has already been erected at Omayyad Circle, with the phrase in Arabic on all sides "We and You and Allah, Together," although no date has been set yet for the voting. It is expected to occur near the end of May. More explicit English banners, with Bashar's photograph, have also been put up in some of the tonier sections of Damascus, calling for Bashar's re-election for a 2007-14 term.

18. (C) COMMENT: All of our informal observing and information from fellow diplomats and other observers buttress the view that turnout for the April parliamentary elections was extremely low. Getting a precise read on the regime's reaction to this turnout is somewhat trickier. While there seems to be significant dissatisfaction inside the regime, some of the potential unhappiness may be attenuated by the usual blend of ignoring reality, spinning

the facts, and telling superiors what they would like to hear. It will be interesting to see if the regime can stir up any greater degree of excitement and turnout for the upcoming presidential referendum.

CORBIN